

DROUGHT POLICY

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Because of the widespread and extreme effects of the drought of 1988, the BLM Montana State Office developed and issued its first drought policy. After incorporating comments from the public, academia, the Montana Stock Growers Association, and others, the BLM formally adopted that policy in January 1989.

In 2003, the BLM's Washington Office issued a BLM-wide policy to reflect changes in regulations related to drought or grazing. These policies have the potential to affect annual livestock operations across the state. By providing guidance during winter and spring months, the BLM strives to assist land managers and permittees in avoiding last-minute economic surprises, improving grazing strategies, and reducing land use impacts.

ISSUES:

As of August 2008, severe drought conditions persist over portions of Sheridan, Roosevelt, Richland, Dawson, and Wibaux counties with dry conditions elsewhere. These dry conditions include drought alerts for Beaverhead, Custer, Prairie, and McCone Counties. The northeast corner of the state will likely see the drought conditions persisting through the remainder of the summer and fall.

Drought Alerts:

The Montana Governor's Drought Advisory Committee strongly encourages watershed groups and county drought committees to convene and undertake planning for drought.

Severe Drought:

Local officials should have local drought planning underway or should convene local drought planning at the earliest opportunity.

This document is intended to provide a summary of current conditions. It is not a recommendation provided by the BLM.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The Montana State Office's policy, supported by the BLM-wide drought policy, presents existing laws and regulations used to guide livestock grazing in Montana and the Dakotas during periods of drought. The BLM has provided copies of this policy to grazing lease holders in the three states several times during the last decade. Montana's Drought Policy may be viewed at <http://www.blm.gov/mt/st/en/prog/grazing.1.html>.

Under the drought policy, the BLM assesses soil moisture levels necessary for plant growth, effective precipitation, environmental demands, plant vigor, and the amount of available water and forage prior to and during the grazing season. Emphasis is placed on allotments having multiple resource values, grazing problems, and a high percentage of federal land. If resource assessments indicate a need to delay livestock turnout, reduce livestock numbers, or close areas to grazing, the BLM works closely with livestock operators to minimize impacts to their operations. Adjustments in fee payments, including any appropriate refunds, will be made on a case-by-case basis.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Most livestock operators, the Montana Stockgrowers Association, local and state grazing districts, and all resource advisory councils support the BLM policy on grazing during periods of drought. The Montana State Office is an active participant in the Governor's Drought Advisory Committee as well as local drought advisory committees and groups. When available and applicable, the BLM provides soil moisture and soil temperature conditions from remote automated weather stations (RAWS) as well as the Soil Climate Analysis Network (SCAN) located throughout the state. This data, when combined with weather and climate data from other agencies and used with GIS soil survey data, assists Montanans in making decisions affecting their management options and techniques. More extensive and detailed soil information is available at: <http://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/soilmst/>.

Montana drought information is available from the state's drought information page at: <http://drought.mt.gov/>. Information on a national scale may be obtained at: <http://www.drought.unl.edu/dm/monitor.html>, http://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/expert_assessment/drought_assessment.shtml, and <http://www.drought.noaa.gov/>.

Additional information on the short term outlook can be obtained at:

http://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/expert_assessment/seasonal_drought.html.

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